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ABSTRACT

Employing experiential adventure activities to develop leadership skills of young people and teachers, the National Leadership Conference (NLC) program, held during a 10-day session at Camp Miniwanca in Michigan, is constructed from 5 distinctive elements: (1) high intensity orientation; (2) carefully structured learning experiences; (3) introductory and in-depth choice experiences; (4) synthesis/consolidation of learning experiences; and (5) preparation for transfer and compact/contract development. Program elements are based on portions of change theory, which involves unfreezing, moving, and refreezing, in order to provide incentives, positive experiences, and increased confidence, with the goal of raising personal and political consciousness of participants and increasing their personal professional skills and knowledge so as to transform their lives and the larger worlds they live in now and in the future. Gains for students who participated in the 1980 NLC are reported as being significant in all areas measured, and continuing feedback from participating groups reinforces the findings. (JD)

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NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Experiential Education
for a Just Society

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The National Leadership Conference -
A Special Niche in the Experiential Spectrum

"On the overnight canoe trip my partner was a big strong guy and I felt really inadequate because I felt my puny strokes were not enough -- that even though I was paddling my hardest I wasn't doing my part and that my strokes really didn't count. Then when I had taken a rather long break, my partner said, 'Start paddling' and I said, Why? It doesn't really make any difference anyway. Then he kind of laughed and said, "Your paddling makes all the difference in the world." So after that I pushed and pulled my hardest and it made me feel great that, even though I weighed 120 and he weighed 280, I really did make a difference.

So I'm going to keep that in mind when thinking of the future -- even though I am one small person in this world of so many -- I can make a difference if I only dip in my oar and paddle my hardest!"

- NLC Student
July, 1980

At the end of this canoe adventure the above student if part of many experiential learning programs would be encouraged to take a strong hard look at his or her life and then venture forth or become "outward bound." The graduate hopefully would retain greater self confidence, self awareness and concern for others as well as some transferable human relations and outdoor skills which could be reapplied back home. Another scenario would send the student back to a corrections institution, halfway house or school to continue to work on "getting it together" so as to make a better transition to responsible adult life. Experiential programming for burned out business executives, stale educators or emergent women over 30 emphasize personal renewal - a quick shot in the arm of adventure to make life worth living. Outcomes for these people are very personal and closely parallel "self discovery" results claimed by yoga, est, running and other artifacts of the human potential or narcisso-fitness movements.

It is easy for the uninitiated to key on a common denominator adventure experience such as a canoe trip and assume that program outcomes will be the same - when in fact they can be quite different. For years each time a school group, corrections organization or management course did a rappel, solo or ropes course the program was dubbed a "survival school," assuming the challenge activity signalled a generic overall program. With greater understanding of these programs and more diversity of outcomes has come clearer distinctions between experiential adventure programs that share some common challenge elements.

Adventure based experiential education programming most often seeks to raise levels of individual competence and confidence. Few directive guidelines are given on how to apply lessons learned and even fewer significant contexts are created for application of what has been gained from an adventure experience. Transfer is left to the individual and the individual's community, little or no follow-up characterizes the relationship between an adventure program and the individual who participates. The exception is programs which are based in schools, correctional institutions or social action institutions which have a continuous relationship with participants. Even here application/transfer is still a problem - how do you take what has been learned in the outdoors through adventure challenge and self-discovery and apply it within the institution from which you have come? The National Leadership Conference (NLC) is a significant departure from these models because it emphasizes not only individual growth and development but corporate growth and development - that is, individuals from identifiable organizations come as a group, function as a group and then are hopefully impacted as a group with resultant influence on institutions.

The National Leadership Conference does not accept its natural setting nor the larger world setting where we all live as static or unchanging. Our assumption is that the people in the Conference, especially the younger people, are in need of incentives, positive experiences and a sense of confidence that they can become actors in their respective micro and macro worlds. Our goal is to raise the personal and political consciousness of those who participate and to increase their personal professional skills and knowledge so as to transform their lives and the larger worlds they live in now and will live in in the future.

The National Leadership Conference employs experiential adventure activities shared by many programs but departs sharply in the outcomes it seeks for participants. The central theme of the NLC is leadership - leadership for a just society. The goal is to hone leadership skills of young people and teachers - concrete skills such as problem solving, conflict resolution, public speaking, and communications - and encourage their application to transform and create society using the models of leadership articulated by Robert Greenleaf (Servant as Leader, 1970), William McGregor Burns (Leadership, 1978), Thomas Gordon (Leadership Effectiveness Training, 1978) and others. Heavy reliance is placed on vigorous experiential activities, making careful connections between what is learned and how it may be applied.

Begun in 1978 the 10 day leadership conference is positioned as a key link in a chain of year-round activities for the people who attend. In 1980, 4 cities (St. Louis, Kansas City, Indiana, Omaha) sent a total of 146 high school juniors, seniors and teachers who in turn returned to a school year of leadership experiences related to earlier training. The NLC is an experiential education program with distinctive ends while sharing some commonly employed means. What follows is an outline of the pattern and purpose of this carefully constructed process.

Method - An Experiential Blend

The NLC attempts to weave the many strands of the 10 day experience into the central theme of the conference. To this end we articulate the goals of the conference early on and keep them bubbling to the surface in as many program ways as possible. These goals are:

- To raise consciousness levels and a sense of efficacy toward areas of major seminars.
- To stimulate higher levels of understanding and to empower participants to act on their individual life spaces.
- To better understand the nature of leadership, especially the role and responsibilities of the servant-leader.
- To work cooperatively with people of a different city, school, race and socio-economic group.
- To identify and/or clarify a personal sense of direction for the future.
- To identify and make decisions regarding specific areas where personal growth is needed.
- To develop a stronger sense of self.

The 10 day NLC program was developed through the blending of insights gained from change theory, leadership theory and experiential education methods. The program is constructed from 5 distinctive elements: (1) High intensity orientation, (2) Carefully structured learning experiences, (3) Choice experiences - both introductory and in-depth, (4) Synthesis or consolidation of learning activities, (5) Preparation for transfer and compact/contract development.

These program elements are based on portions of change theory, popularized by Kurt Lewin (1949). A high intensity opening or orientation is necessary to break the bonds or connections with the past experiences of the participants, followed by a series of content filled experiences which serve as viable change options to participants. Final synthesizing or solidifying experiences then consolidate the new learning that should have taken place for individuals. In summary Lewin's construct is: 1) Unfreezing, 2) Moving and 3) Refreezing.

The NLC begins with an intensive one day orientation involving small group activity, outdoor adventure challenges and small group problem solving, all of which are geared to unfreezing or loosening the bonds of past experience that the students arrived with and opening them to new thinking and behaviors. The basic grouping for orientation and subsequent small group activities is the

Primary Group which consists of one male cabin and one female cabin and the adult advisors or resource people living in those cabins; cabins are made up of participants from each of the cities. Next there are 4 days of seminars on leadership theory plus a block of special interest sessions planned from student choices and resource staff skills which allow students to explore a wide range of leadership and related skills. The moving process is consolidated with the pursuits of excellence; two day-long optional activities - one of an outdoor adventure nature and one of a leadership theory/issues oriented type which encourages students to follow through in depth on a newly generated interest area. Refreezing or synthesis occurs in special closing seminars involving inter-disciplinary teams of resource staff and through compact development exercises. Activities such as a 5.6 mile marathon run, banquet and candlelight ceremony are planned as additional consolidating experiences. The pace of activity during the final phase is less intense to allow reflection and informal integration of learning. The flow of the programming then is high intensity initial involvement (unfreezing); maximum choice, disparate options with opportunity for pursuits in depth (moving) and a final pulling together/synthesis block of time (refreezing).

Robert Greenleaf's series on servant leadership has provided the philosophical ends for the specific skills taught. Greenleaf's thesis is that the effective leader is always a servant first and authority wh ch deserves our allegiance is that which is freely granted to the leader by the led in proportion to the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. A litmus of servant stature is whether all people concerned "grow" while being served. This notion closely parallels James McGregor Burns' definition of transforming leadership:

> Transforming leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Purposes which may have begun as separate but related (transactional) become forced. Power bases are linked not as counterweights but as mutual support for common purpose. Transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led.
>
> - James McGregor Burns
> Leadership, 1978

There is no clearer description of the leadership style we attempt to model and encourage than this statement by Kathryn Nelson, a key NLC Resource Staff person:

A LEADER

I went on search to become a leader.

I searched high and low. I spoke with authority, people listened but alas, there was one who was wiser than I and they followed him.

I sought to inspire confidence but the crowd responded, "Why should we trust you?"

I postured and I assumed the look of leadership with a countenance that glowed with confidence and pride. But many passed me by and never noticed my air of elegance.

I ran ahead of the other, pointing the way to new heights. I demonstrated that I knew the route to greatness. And then I looked back and I was alone.

What shall I do, I queried? I've tried hard and used all that I know.

And I sat me down and I pondered long.

And then I listened to the voices around me. And I heard what the group was trying to accomplish.

I rolled up my sleeves and joined in the work.

As we worked I asked, "Are we all together in what we want to do and how to get the job done?"

And we thought together and we fought together and we struggled towards our goal.

I found myself encouraging the fainthearted. I sought the ideas of those too shy to speak out.

I taught those who had little skill. I praised those who worked hard.

When our task was completed, one of the groups turned to me and said, "This would not have been done but for your leadership."

At first I said, "I didn't lead, I just worked with the rest."

And then I understood, leadership is not a goal. It's a way of reaching a goal.

I lead best when I help others to go where we've decided we want to go.

I lead best when I help others to use themselves creatively.

I lead best when I forget about myself as leader and focus on my group, their needs and their goals.

To lead is to serve. To give to achieve TOGETHER.

Leadership skills taught are derived from the basic functional areas of leadership generally described as: 1) Human relations skills and 2) Task accomplishment skills. Connecting the overall program flow, the philosophical theme and the specific skills is a series of carefully constructed events - most employing the process we call experiencial learning. Generally described, each major activity consists of action and reflection followed by personalizing or connecting the activity to the here and now of the individual participant. How this spells out, should be apparent as each element of the NLC is examined.

Orientation: Immersion and Team Building

Building a community as quickly as possible is important. To do this we employ the shared unfamiliarity of a magnificant camp setting - 360 acres of mature forest bordering both the eastern shore of Lake Michigan and an inland lake - as a means of drawing people together. The approach is immersion. Shortly after the 150-200 participants arrive from their various cities, they wal a major portion of the grounds with a resource person guide, receive a brief introductory talk, are broken down into Primary Groups (one male and one female cabin) which together negotiate a series of obstacles on a night walk. The Primary Groups are also given other tasks requiring individual and corporate in tiative and leadership. Primary Groups are asked to design a daily running conditioning program in preparation for a final 5.6 mile run on Day 10 and be responsible for periodic pre-meal thoughts and dining room setups. In addition, each primary group joins 3 others to function as a community of 40-50 people who travel/learn together through several learning blocks.

Orientation is demanding and pushes both students and staff to galvanize around specific tasks and to quickly become a larger learning/support community where all participants feel genuine affiliation and mutual commitment. Events are tightly scheduled and action oriented - in sharp contrast to the closing days.

Basic Seminars: Core Curriculum

The 4 communities of NLC rotate through each of the 4 Basic Seminars: one per day. They are 6 hours in length. Each seminar consists of:

- A basic theme/area related to creating a just society
- An experience with that theme
- Emphasis on specific leadership skills
- An exercise(s) to aid in reflection/application or personalizing the lessons learned

Leadership for Spaceship Earth - 6 hours

Themes:
- Seeking alternative futures in energy, environmental usage
- Raising consciousness to Third World needs
- Appropriate Technology

Experiences:
- Construction of a wind generator and solar collector on top of a sand dune
- Problem solving with an environmental energy simulator computer
- Eating a meal reflective of the world community, i.e., 6% of group receives an American meal and the remainder either a Second or Third World meal

Leadership Skills
- Problem Solving
- Planning
- Human Relations

Reflection/ Personalizing
- Physical experience of construction of generator and collector
- Journal entries
- Discussion
- Experience of hunger while trying to do heavy labor

Self and Leadership - 6 hours

Themes:
- Understanding self
- Managing self
- Applying self

Experiences:
- Rigorous ropes obstacle course for teams of students
- Self disclosure exercises, debriefing of ropes course

Leadership Skills
- Conflict Resolution
- Problem Solving
- Human Relations

Reflection/ Personalizing
- Experience of fear, challenge, success, failure, etc.
- Experience of sharing above with peers and discussion
- Active reflection through journal entries

Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Leadership - 6 hours

Themes:
- Exposure of students to the ethical ideal of the servant/leader
- The need for cooperation, mutual support, sharing and empathy in the role of leader

Experiences:
- Instruction and experience of canoeing - many for the first time
- Canoeing with imposed physical handicaps
- Eating a meal requiring redistribution of food to all participants in order that there be equal amount for all

Leadership Skills:
- Problem Solving
- Planning
- Conflict Resolution

Reflection/ Personalizing:
- Discussion/debriefing
- Experience of being part of an equitable/inequitable meal
- Journal entries
- Experience of trusting others when "handicapped"
- Experience of fear, challenge, success, failure, etc.

Creativity and Communication in Leadership - 6 hours

Themes:
- Understanding of the many dimensions of human communication

Experiences:
- Series of theatrical and communication exercises

Leadership Skills:
- Communications
- Human Relations
- Public Speaking

Reflection/ Personalizing
- Discussion/debriefing
- Experience of fear, challenge, success, failure, etc.

Concurrent with the basic seminars are daily special events - speakers, films, music, dramatic events - each in some way related to the conference

goals. The cycle of Primary Group activities - morning running, pre-meal thoughts, and eating lodge responsibilities are continued throughout this 4 day block.

Elements of Choice: A Chance to Explore

Special Interest Groups

Two hour seminars on a variety of topics are offered during the first half of the NLC. The purpose of these sessions is to expose students to new ideas, new options and new skills - some quite academic and others purely recreational. All major writers on alternative learning cite the importance of choice in program design. At the NLC the freedom to choose is seen as a powerful model congruent with democratic/participatory institutions. In this case much of our message is the medium of choice.

Listed below are the Special Interest Group offerings for 1980:

Acclimatization
Brainstorming
Ecological Research
Environmental Energy Simulator
Expressing Yourself with a Camera
When God Made Me, He Must Have Been Having a Bad Day
Hum Your Spirit Home
Identifying Community Problems: Strategies for Designing Your Follow-up Project
Macrame'
Massage & Conscious Relaxation
Minimal Bike Maintenance
Needlepoint
Pottery
Sailing
Miniwanca Weight Watchers
Writing for a Newspaper
Nutrition
Problem Solving
Water Rescue
Wind Generator
Canoeing
Choral Speaking
High Ropes
Indian Beading
Leather Beading and Tooling
Silkscreening
Swimming Instruction
Trail Construction Project: Use of Basic Wood Tools
Water Games for Non-Swimmers
Woodworking and Cardboard Crafts

Pursuits of Excellence (POE): Exploration in Depth

In these choice activities students venture deeper into areas of interest and pursue them for 24 hours. Several of the POE'S are physically rigorous 24 hour outdoor challenges reminiscent of a scaled down Outward Bound course. Others explore a small town employing cultural journalism models popularized by the Foxfire movement, while a large number pursue an academic, public service or performing arts area.

Listed below are the options from which each person was asked to select two:

Solo Canoeing
A Gift of Excellence
Creative Dramatics and Performance Techniques
Fishing
Human Sexuality and Sexual Roles in the '80's
Listening, The Key to Learning
Newspaper
Developing Planning Skills
Wind Technology and Solar Heating
Bicycle Touring
Down River Canoe Expedition
Good Samaritan Ethic
Silver Lake to Miniwanca Excursion
Small Town Experience
Migrant Workers/Small Town Exchange Experience
Trip to Nowhere

City Night

The purpose of this night is for team building to take place within cities in preparation for later collective efforts - and to provide another chance for individual expression and leadership to emerge and be tested. Participants with the help of accompanying teachers return to their original city groups to present a performing arts representation of their metropolitan area. Students who share the same regional identity have created elaborate productions depicting the talents of individuals and the collective genius of the group. Everything from the Indianapolis 500 to the St. Louis Gateway Arch have been presented.

Evaluation/Synthesis/Transfer: Pulling it Together

Evaluation Seminars

Groups of students come together to discuss goals of the conference and share insights. This experience helps consolidate learning and provides valuable feedback for the staff.

Marathon Run

A 5.6 mile shared challenge is run by all 180 people with the objective of everyone finishing - a galvanizing experience for the entire conference and for the Primary Groups which have trained together.

Banquet

A collaborative activity where everyone cooks, decorates and performs - a coming together of the Conference around a large shared task - again requiring a total shared effort demonstrating cooperation, communication, planning, conflict resolution and problem solving by everyone - staff and students alike.

Candlelight Closing Ceremonies - Final Night

This is a powerful ceremonial closure of the NLC where everyone is placed out at dusk on a 2 hour long reflective watch then brought together around a fire to share lessons learned, feelings or thanksgiving for the previous 9 days. Music, Lake Michigan and the usually cl ar night serve to stimulate all participants in a significant way.

Compacts

City groups meet toward the end of the NLC to brainstorm how they will create a year of following leadership group activity. This is a practical applied exercise in leadership where the city teams must come together a round the task of building a year-round program. It has been heartening to see how structures in each of the cities have matured through the years.

Teachers Seminar: Teacher Advisors

Teacher advisors accompany each group of students from the various high schools. A conference-within-a-conference is run for these people consisting of special methods seminars, explorations and tasks. Teachers are asked to help design some of the POE learning experiences for students, serve in counselor roles within cabins and help during and after the conference in the processing to the experience. They also are the major planners for year-round leadership programs in the cities involved.

Evaluation

Dan Conrad, nationally recognized educator from the University of Minnesota, conducted an evaluation of the 1980 National Leadership Conference. His measurable results exceeded our and his expectations. Conrad triangulated data gathered through participant observation, questionnaires and polls and formal pre and post tests. His formal report documents statistically significant gains for students in all areas so measured. Continuing feedback from participating cities reinforces the findings.

The NLC Today and Tomorrow

In 1980 The American Youth Foundation spread the word of the NLC process to a number of new metropolitan areas. Through this information dissemination and the strong, clearly written 1980 evaluation, we expect at least 5 new city groups will be a part of the 1981 Michigan NLC. Because our space is limited at Camp Miniwanca and because travel from outside the Great

Lakes area is becoming prohibitive, we are considering developing regional National Leadership Conferences along with the Michigan NLC. Bids for such a decentralization have come from resource staff people in Missouri and New York; opening the possibility of conferences closer to home for participants from these and adjoining states. We hope this proliferation can begin in 1982 and feel that decentralization with more opportunities for shared leadership is a healthy direction.